

Historiography of the Pequot War

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This paper examines the historiography and primary sources associated with the Pequot War (1636-1637) in the context of reconstructing battlefields of the Pequot War. These sources provide insight on Native and Colonial combatants, weapons, tactics, key terrain, movements, and battle events. This information is used to construct battlefield timelines with hypothesized archaeological signatures, and to analyze against battle-related objects recovered from metal detector surveys to judge accuracy. Recovered battlefield assemblages were continually evaluated against these hypothesized archaeological signatures, and the historical record, and vice versa, until the best “fit” between the archaeological and historical record was realized. The goal of this process was to identify and integrate spatially and temporally discrete battlefield events, and recovered assemblages of battle-related objects to reconstruct the battlefield in its entirety.

The narratives from soldiers of the Pequot War such as John Mason, John Underhill, Lion Gardiner, and Philip Vincent, as well as John Winthrop’s *Journal* and the *Winthrop Papers* have provided the basis of most historians’ knowledge and the interpretation of the Pequot War.¹ However, these sources have rarely been subjected to historical criticism to assess their purpose or veracity, nor have they been compared in a systematic way to see if earlier sources influenced later ones, and to identify and rectify apparent inconsistencies in their content as they relate to battle events. Our analysis has demonstrated these inconsistencies are often not the result of errors or biases of the author, but often reflect the perspectives and observations of commanders and soldiers on different parts of the battlefield – a realization that significantly enhanced our understanding of battle events. In so doing we came to understand many of the nuances of

content, biases, direct observations of soldiers, and purpose contained within each narrative which in turn allowed us to integrate seemingly contradictory and disparate information into battlefield timelines that resulted in a far more complete understanding of the nature and progression of battlefield events.

This process yielded some surprising and significant results, particularly the discovery of two new Pequot War narratives; one by John Mason, and the other by an anonymous. The anonymous appears to have served at Saybrook Fort during the war, and or participated in many of the battles of the Pequot war, or interviewed soldiers who did – likely both. Neither of these narratives was recognized by historians as original Pequot War narratives since their publication in the late 17th century.

The contextualization and critique of all six narratives was critical in re-constructing the events and actions associated with *Battlefields of the Pequot War*. Generally the information associated with 17th century American battlefields is incomplete, inconsistent and lacking in detail, potentially a serious obstacle in reconstructing 17th century battlefields. To redress these shortcomings each narrative was analyzed to answer a series of questions.

The principle narratives of the Pequot war (Mason, Underhill, Gardiner, Vincent) written by men who directly participated in and observed battle events, or who spoke with soldiers shortly after a battle were subjected to the most intensive source criticism. Each narrative differed in the battles or actions they described, but in some instances they overlapped in their accounts of particular battle events. For example, John Underhill's narrative describes the earliest actions of the war at Block Island and on the Thames River, as well as the Mistick Campaign.² John Mason describes actions during the Mistick Campaign through the last battle of the war at the Fairfield Swamp Fight.³ Lion Gardiner describes encounters with the Pequot

during and shortly after the initial attack on the Pequot along the Thames River, but focuses the remainder of his narrative on the Siege and Battle of Saybrook Fort in the first six months of the war.⁴ Philip Vincent's narrative describes some of the actions at Saybrook but focuses primarily on the Mistick Campaign.⁵

Most historians do not believe Vincent was a soldier during the Pequot War but rather obtained his information from Massachusetts Bay soldiers upon their return to Boston after the Mistick Campaign. However, recent research indicates that while Vincent likely did not participate in the Mistick Campaign, he was a Pequot War veteran and served with Gardener at Saybrook Fort.⁶ The information related in his narrative of the Mistick Campaign was likely obtained from Underhill's men shortly after their return to Saybrook from the Mistick Campaign, and not upon their return to Boston as originally believed.

Although John Winthrop Sr. did not directly observe battle events, his *Journal* reflects "real time" information in the form of letters and oral reports from commanders or soldiers who were present.⁷ Because of the timeliness of the information he received, as well as the demonstrated veracity of his accounts, the additional and complementary information in his journal entries is an extremely valuable source of information. The *Winthrop Papers* contain correspondences and perspectives from a variety of individuals who participated in the war or spoke with individuals who did.⁸ For example, the letters of Rhode Island Colony Governor Roger Williams are particularly important in this regard as they contain some of the only information on Native actions and perspectives during the war – albeit biased and driven by Narragansett agenda.

Collectively, these accounts provide information on the combatants, weapons, tactics, movements, and battlefield events during the Pequot War and reflect the backgrounds and

personal experiences of the men who wrote them. For example we now know that Mason, Gardiner, Underhill and Vincent, as well as many of the men who fought in the Pequot War were combat veterans, many of whom knew one another from their service in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in Europe. Our original characterization of the Connecticut soldiers who fought in the Mistick Campaign as “farm boys” led by a few experienced soldiers was completely in error. As many as 30%-40% of the Connecticut soldiers in the Mistick Campaign, and perhaps throughout the war, were combat veterans of the Thirty Years War. This information provides a decidedly different perspective on the capability and experience of English soldiers and likely influenced the planning, tactics, and battlefield decisions during the war.⁹

These sources also reflect the sophistication, experience, and capability of the Pequot military organization. While some English readily dismissed the Pequot as fearful of English arms and not a force to be feared on the battlefield, English commanders such as Gardiner and Underhill who fought the Pequot in the early engagements of the war greatly respected their military capabilities. Their experiences in the first six months of the war greatly influenced the evolution of English tactics employed later in the war, particularly during the Mistick Fort Campaign. Until Mistick, the Pequot did not lose a single engagement against the English.

The principle narratives of the Pequot War written by Anonymous, Mason, Underhill, Gardiner, and Vincent were written at different times and for different purposes. With the exceptions of the Anonymous narrative, Mason’s original narrative and Gardiner’s narrative, the remaining accounts by Mason, Underhill, and Vincent were widely read and captured the imaginations of 17th century audiences in London and New England. The dates when these various narratives were written and published provide important insights into the purpose for

which they were written. Interestingly, with the exception of Gardiner's narrative in the Trinity College archives, no original of the remaining narratives has been located.¹⁰

Within a month after the Pequot War ended in late July 1637, Philip Vincent's *A True Relation of the Late Battell Fought in New England* was published in London.¹¹ Six months later, Captain John Underhill's *Newes from America* was also published in London. His work, as well as Philip Vincent's work, was overseen by Mr. Bellamy an author, printer and soldier of the Thirty Years War, stationed at the Two Grayhounds or the Three Golden Lions.¹² The timing of the publications so soon after the war is interesting and not entirely understood, although they were likely written to advance various personal agendas. While this was not Vincent's first treatise on war, it was Underhill's who may have written his narrative in part to explain his role in the colony during the Antinomianism Crisis of 1636-1638; for which he was banned from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Parts of his narrative may also have been written in response to Vincent's description of Underhill's less than martial ardor during the Mistick Fort Battle.

Mason's and Gardiner's narrative have an entirely different history and context. These men did not write their narratives until 1659-60, twenty years after the war. Unlike Underhill and Vincent, Mason's and Gardiner's narratives were written at the request of John Winthrop Jr. shortly after he became Governor of Connecticut in 1657 – a fact acknowledged by both men in the introductions to their narratives. To prove Winthrop's involvement in the genesis of their narratives, the title written on Gardiner's original manuscript "Leift Lion Gardener his relation of the Pequot Warres" is in John Winthrop Jr.'s unmistakable poor handwriting. Unlike Mason's narrative, Gardiner's narrative was apparently not seen by the general public until it was published 1833 by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

It is argued that Gardiner's narrative did not meet or serve the objectives for which Governor Winthrop originally solicited Mason's and Gardener's narratives to establish the validity of Connecticut's petition to Charles II for patent and charter based principally on a claim to Connecticut by Right of Conquest in a just war.

The history and context of John Mason's narratives are interesting and have direct implications for the veracity and usefulness of the other war narratives and sources in reconstructing battle events. The version of the Mason narrative most widely acknowledged by historians as Mason's only narrative was published by Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston in 1736. Prince obtained his copy from Mason's grandson, and Prince specifically states that he included all the prefaces and introductions excluded by Mather.¹³

Our research has identified a second, and we argue the earliest Mason narrative likely penned shortly after Winthrop Jr.'s request. This narrative appears in print only once, in William Hubbard's *History of the Indian Wars in New England*. Since its publication in 1677, this narrative was never been acknowledged or cited by any historian as an original Mason narrative.¹⁴ The later Mason narrative and the one most familiar to historians first appeared in a heavily edited version in Increase Mather's *Brief History of the War with the Indians in New England*.¹⁵ Mather kept most of the content intact with minor edits, but removed all of the prefaces and introductions we see in the later complete version by Prince published in 1736. Mather states he received the manuscript from Mr. John Allyn, Connecticut Colony secretary.¹⁶

Interestingly, both Mason narratives appear in print almost simultaneously in Hubbard's and Mather's histories of King Philip's War. Why each author chose or only had access to a particular version of Mason's narrative is unclear, and unlike Mather, Hubbard does not say where he obtained his version.

Hubbard's and Mather's histories are viewed by most historians as documents most relevant to understanding King Philip's War, as both authors drew upon written and oral sources closely connected to the events of the war. Many historians consider the information they used to write their histories of the Pequot War were based on secondary sources known to historians since the 17th century. As a result Hubbard's and Mather's histories of the Pequot War were never given sufficient scrutiny to discover the hidden narratives contained within them. In fact, Mather and Hubbard were competent historians by 17th century and later standards. They include (and cited) a number of written and oral sources in their histories of the Pequot War including unidentified oral sources and various letters contained in the *Winthrop Papers*, Winthrop's *Journal*, and original manuscripts from the Pequot War such as Mason and the Anonymous.

There are several important differences between the two Mason narratives that support the argument that Mason's narrative was originally published in Hubbard, and later revised to support Connecticut's petition for patent and charter. Documentary evidence in court records within the *Rawlinson Collection* from the Bodleian Archives, Oxford University as well as the Kew of London indicate the complete second Mason's narrative (the Prince version) may have been included in the materials submitted with Connecticut's petition for charter; granted by King Charles II on April 23, 1662.

The original Mason narrative in Hubbard is written very much like a battlefield report with no introductions or justification for the war. It is also written in first person and does not contain any references to God's Providence in the successful prosecution of the war. The later and revised Prince version is written entirely in the third person and contains numerous references to "God's Providence" in conquering of Pequot lands. It also includes prefaces and

introductions not found in the earlier version including sections titled “Some Grounds for the War Against the Pequot” and a “Brief History of the War.”

The differences are the result of revisions made at the request of Governor John Winthrop Jr. who intended to include an appropriate epistemological grounded narrative of the Pequot War in the materials and correspondence submitted to Charles II to obtain a charter for Connecticut. The appropriate narrative needed to contain not only a history of the war describing Pequot injustices and savagery, and a justification for prosecuting the war against the Pequot in a just cause, but to convey that God’s providence played a major. Mason’s revised narrative achieved all of this.

Within the context of battlefield archaeology, Mason’s narratives, singly and collectively, greatly add to our knowledge and understanding of the battle events of the Pequot War, particularly the Mistick Campaign. Although his narratives differ in some details (none of them contradictory) and focus on different events, the information contained within each narrative is consistent and complementary attesting to the veracity of each account. As such, the differences in detail, content, and focus between the two narratives serve to enhance the significance of Mason’s collective narrative resulting in the most complete and comprehensive narrative of the Pequot War.

Important differences in detail and focus between the two narratives include a lengthy discussion and justification in the Prince narrative of why Mason changed his commission from the General Court to land along the Thames River and conduct a frontal assault on the Pequot to launching an attack from Narragansett Country predicated on speed, surprise, and attacking the Pequot in their forts, not the open field. In this explanation Mason reveals a lot about how intelligence was gathered by the English and their recognition of the superiority of Pequot

tactics, and speed of movement. The Mason narrative in Hubbard discusses at length his negotiations with the Narragansett, his growing concern with delays, and his decision to proceed to Pequot country without waiting for additional reinforcements from Massachusetts Bay. The Mason narrative in Hubbard also provides important new details on the attack on Mistick Fort including the intensity of the battle inside the fort and the high number of English casualties which influenced Mason's decision to burn the fort. The narrative also provides additional information on the intensity of the fighting during the English withdrawal to their ships waiting in the Thames River.

A second previously unrecognized narrative was discovered in Mather's history of the Pequot War. Mather states he discovered the Anonymous manuscript in Reverend Davenport's library "wherein the passages of the Pequot War are described."¹⁷ Although he does not know the author of the manuscript "saying it was one who had a particular and personal acquaintance with those affairs."¹⁸ Analysis of the narrative suggests it was written by someone very familiar with the events that transpired during the Siege and Battle of Saybrook Fort between September 1636 to March 1637, and either participated in some of the other battles of the Pequot War or obtained information from the men who did. Such candidates include Rev. John Higginson, whom for a time resided in the fort walls and wrote many letters about the war, or perhaps Robert Chapman, a literate soldier stationed at Saybrook and kept a journal that burned with the fort in 1647.¹⁹

Portions of this manuscript appear in two histories, Mather and Governor Thomas Hutchinson of *Massachusetts's History of New England*. After Mather's publication, the narrative did not resurface until 1764 with Hutchinson's history.²⁰ Unfortunately, both authors included only those portions of the Anonymous narrative that they felt contained information not

included in earlier narratives. As a result they included little if any information on the Mistick Fort Battle and other important events of the war. Hutchinson too only included those parts of the Anonymous narrative that were not included in any previous histories or narratives. The most glaring omission in Mather's and Hutchinson's versions is any information on the Battle of Mistick Fort. Nonetheless, when Mather's and Hutchinson's versions of the Anonymous account are combined, the narrative is an extremely important addition to the literature of the Pequot War, and provides a number of details that were invaluable in reconstructing several battlefields.

Endnotes

¹ John Winthrop and James Kendall Hosmer, *Winthrop's Journal, "History of New England," 1630-1649*, 2 vols., Original Narratives of Early American History (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1908), microform; Adam Winthrop et al., *Winthrop Papers... 1498-1649*, 5 vols. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929), microform.

² John Underhill et al., *Nevves from America, or, a New and Experimentall Discoverie of New England : Containing a True Relation of Their War-Like Proceedings These Two Yeares Last, with a Figure of the Indian Fort or Palizado : Also a Discovery of These Places That as yet Have Very Few or No Inhabitants Which Would Yeeld Speciall Accommodation to Such as Will Plant There, Viz. Queenapoick, Agu-Wom, Hudsons River, Long Island, Nahanticut, Martins Vinyard, Pequet, Naransett Bay, Elizabeth Islands, Puscataway, Casko, with About a Hundred Islands Neere to Casko* (London: Printed by J.D. for Peter Cole, and are to be sold at the signe of the Glove in Corne-hill neere the Royall Exchange, 1638).

³ John Mason and Thomas Prince, *A Brief History of the Pequot War* (Boston: printed and sold by S. Kneeland and T. Green ... 1736).

⁴ Lion Gardiner and W. N. C. Carlton, *Relation of the Pequot Warres* (Hartford, CT: The Case, 1901).

⁵ Philip Vincent, *A True Relation of the Late Battell Fought in New England, between the English, and the Salvages* (London: M.P. for Nathanael Butter, and John Bellamie, 1637).

⁶ Robert Payne, *The Island: Being the Story of the Fortunes & Vicissitudes & Triumphs of the Island, Once Known as Monchonake ... Now Known as Gardiner's Island*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1958).

⁷ John Winthrop and James Kendall Hosmer, *Winthrop's Journal, "History of New England," 1630-1649*, 2 vols. (New York, NY: C. Scribner's sons, 1908).

⁸ Winthrop et al., *Winthrop Papers... 1498-1649*.

⁹ Kevin McBride, Ashley Bissonnette, David Naumec, Noah Fellman, Laurie Pasteryak, Jacqueline Veniger, "National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Program Technical Report Battle of Mistick Fort Documentation Plan (Ga-2255-09-017)" (2012).

¹⁰ Lion Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres," ed. Trinity College (Watkinson Manuscript Collections, 1660).

¹¹ Vincent, *A True Relation of the Late Battell Fought in New England, between the English, and the Salvages*.

¹² Leona Rostenberg, "Bellamy: "Pilgrim" Publisher," *Bibliographical Society of America, Papers* 50 (1956).

¹³ Mason and Prince, *A Brief History of the Pequot War*.

¹⁴ William Hubbard and American Imprint Collection (Library of Congress), *A Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians in New-England, from the First Planting Thereof in the Year 1607. To This Present Year 1677. But Chiefly of the Late Troubles in the Two Last Years, 1675. And 1676. To Which Is Added a Discourse About the Warre with the Pequods in the Year 1637* (Boston, MA: Printed by John Foster, 1677).

¹⁵ Increase Mather and American Imprint Collection (Library of Congress), *A Relation of the Troubles Which Have Hapned in New-England, by Reason of the Indians There. From the Year 1614. To the Year 1673. Wherein the Frequent Conspiracies of the Indians to Cutt Off the English. And the Wonderfull Providence of God, in Disappointing Their Devices, Is Declared* (Boston, MA: Printed and sold by John Foster, 1677).

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Mather and American Imprint Collection (Library of Congress), *A Relation of the Troubles Which Have Hapned in New-England, by Reason of the Indians There. From the Year 1614. To the Year 1673. Wherein the Frequent Conspiracies of the Indians to Cutt Off the English. And the Wonderfull Providence of God, in Disappointing Their Devices, Is Declared*.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Anne Sweet, interview by Ashley Bissonnette 2012.

²⁰ Thomas Hutchinson, John Hutchinson, and Pre-1801 Imprint Collection (Library of Congress), *The History Of ... Massachusetts-Bay*, 3 vols. (Boston, MA: Printed by Thomas & John Fleet at the Heart and Crown in Cornhill, 1764).